

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 48 | Number 5 (Summer 1986)

pps. 314-318

Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream/J. E. Stimson: Photographer of the West

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1986 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream/J. E. Stimson: Photographer of the West." *The Annals of Iowa* 48 (1986), 314-318.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9174>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Book Reviews

Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream, by John E. Carter. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. vii, 142 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$29.95 cloth.

J. E. Stimson: Photographer of the West, by Mark Junge. Foreword by T. A. Larson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. ix, 211 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical note. \$29.95 cloth.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, photographers ventured from the civilized East to capture the romance and contradictions of the American West, conscious of the closing of a 400-year epoch. The legacy of two such practitioners has been re-revealed to us by two collections handsomely presented by the University of Nebraska Press. These two collections of photographs, roughly contemporaneous, chronicle strikingly different wests. The first is *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream*, by John D. Carter, curator of photographs at the Nebraska State Historical Society. The second is *J. E. Stimson, Photographer of the West*, by Mark Junge, Deputy Wyoming State Historic Preservation Officer. Both books contain biographical and critical introductions as well as informative picture captions. Relevant passages from Great Plains literature accompany the Butcher photographs in Carter's volume; Junge introduces in detail the subject of each chapter's photographs. Both books are well researched and scholarly but appeal to a broader audience as well—just as the East has always been enthralled by the West.

Solomon Butcher was not a successful man. Although he had big plans and high hopes, poor timing combined with simple bad luck to dog his steps. Even his photographs, a major contribution to our national heritage, failed to win him fortune or fame. In many ways his life parallels the frontier he chronicled so beautifully—full of false starts, missed chances, natural disasters, and failure to live up to expectations. Yet, in spite of all that, Butcher and the sod-house frontier he photographed left us a meaningful and enduring legacy.

Born in 1856 in Virginia, Butcher lived in Illinois and Ohio before migrating to Nebraska in 1880 with his father and other relatives. He hated pioneering. His homesteading effort lasted just two weeks before he returned the land to the government and moved on. Butcher

tried medical school, married, and returned to Custer County, Nebraska, in 1882 to carve a niche for himself and make a fortune, although his means to that end were uncertain. His family lived in poverty and discomfort while he struggled to succeed as a photographer. When he lost his studio in 1885 as a result of financial problems stemming from drought and farm failures, he decided to tell the story of the farmer's frontier in pictures. Thus began years of itinerancy as his photographic history of Custer County took shape.

The Custer County history did not bring Butcher the success and fortune he sought. His enterprise was tied to the fortunes of the land whose story he told, so when the land struggled with drought and depression in the 1890s, Butcher's project languished. A fire destroyed the biographical portion of his manuscript in 1899. It took the backing of a wealthy resident to launch the project again. Its completion in 1901 brought Butcher closer to success than he ever had been before or would be again. He sold out the first printing—one thousand copies—at once and was able to order another. Subsequent photographic projects were not particularly lucrative, however, so he looked elsewhere for the fortune he was convinced awaited him.

As a practical matter Butcher had to dispose of the tremendous volume of glass plate negatives he had accumulated over the years. In a development that frustrated and embittered him, the Nebraska state legislature, caught in a power struggle between two powerful adversaries, offered him only six hundred dollars for his entire collection of negatives. Butcher had no alternative but to accept. Continuing his search for the main chance, he sold electromagnetic oil detectors and patent medicine of his own invention. Carter sums up Butcher's life in words that appropriately describe the Great Plains farmers' frontier: "For all of his dreaming and planning, he was often barely able to make ends meet" (9).

Although Solomon Butcher's life did not turn out as he might have wished, our heritage has been enriched by his vision. He captured the Great Plains farming frontier in its rawest stages. John Carter suggests that he was not a particularly artistic or capable photographer. As art, then, his work is not particularly noteworthy. But as a chronicle of a way of life—Carter calls it "states of existence" (11)—Butcher's pictures are outstanding. What did he photograph? Most often his camera captured noble, honest people arranged stiffly before their crude frontier dwellings with many of their possessions—some mundane, some prized—arranged ceremoniously about. He also photographed town scenes, cattle and cowboys, and farm people at work. But it is Butcher's resolute homesteaders who seize the imagination.

Carter believes that Butcher's goal was the celebration of "the nobility of life on the land" (11) and that the faces he depicted were those of "hopes, determination, and accomplishment" (11). If we see "deprivation and suffering," it is because we project our modern belief in and need for pioneer heroics on to our ancestors. Carter quotes one survivor of the experience: "We came to win the battle and we did. . . . We were empire builders. The future was ours" (11). This, he believes, was Butcher's vision and was the legacy of the Great Plains farming frontier. Only two pages later, however, Carter admits that only one-third of all homesteaders in the area actually proved up on their claims and that hard times forced some of these out in the years to come. This was a west where day to day survival was heroic, where failure depopulated the region far more rapidly than success could populate it. The nobility in these farm family faces is not a nobility built of conquest; it arose instead from hardship, struggle, and pain. Today we know the ultimate outcome of their efforts—their land is sparsely populated, their social institutions fragmented, their culture overwhelmed by an industrial and urban world. Butcher did not know the outcome, but he knew the struggle.

Carter describes Solomon Butcher as an iconographer in the history of the West. That he was. But his icons were not examples of the success of the yeoman ideal as Carter suggests. Butcher's subject was the irony of the frontier experience. His people believed that they were engaged in a good work, a work that would result in success and wealth in an agricultural empire. They thought they had found the Promised Land. Instead these farm families found hard work, hard times, and uncertainty. Those few who managed to stay had to come to terms with the land and learn new skills to survive in it. Butcher's photographs capture the faces of valiant people caught in a struggle whose outcome is in doubt. In that way, they stand as a metaphor for the human condition.

Unlike Solomon Butcher, J. E. Stimson was a successful man. The meaning of the West that he photographed was more mythically and less typically correct than Butcher's Custer County. Stimson was also born in Virginia and spent several years in South Carolina before moving to southeastern Nebraska. At an early age he apprenticed himself to a photographer cousin in Wisconsin and began learning his craft. In 1889 he moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming with his studio equipment and embarked on the career that served him well for nearly sixty years. A trip to the Big Horn Mountains in the 1890s stimulated the photographer's interest in the striking western scenery all around him. He began marketing his views of the wilderness West. In 1900 the Union Pacific Railroad contracted with him for a series of publicity

photos taken in Union Pacific country—a ten-state strip traversed by the mighty transcontinental. Stimson was able to photograph anything that struck his fancy; hence his collection of towns, farms, scenic wonders, and citizens of the Union Pacific's West.

After 1900 Stimson was rarely without some kind of official contract for photographic work. He took the pictures of Wyoming that graced several of the state's exhibits at the St. Louis World's Fair, did promotional and tourism work for the Department of Immigration, and in later years traveled to all of the Bureau of Reclamation projects to make a photographic record of their progress. Stimson's contracts allowed him to sell prints from his collection to other interested parties. This combination of steady and secure work and individual entrepreneurship enabled him to live comfortably in Cheyenne. He and his wife raised two daughters in a lovely home they built across the street from the Wyoming state capitol. After his death in 1959, the state of Wyoming purchased his collection of negatives for two thousand dollars, and the collection remains in the state. Yet, as Mark Junge notes in his introduction, Stimson's work is now not well known, even in Wyoming. He hopes to change that with this volume, creating a recognition of Stimson's importance as an artist of national, as well as regional, heritage.

Joseph Stimson's photographs capture the American West in transition. The frontier is gone. Industry, growth, and activity are the order of the day. Of course, there are photographs of pristine wilderness as well, but it is the wilderness of the tourist that is displayed, not a wilderness to be conquered and settled. Except for the wilderness pictures, many of the views could have been taken anywhere in the United States at the time. The homes, the cities, the factories, and the people all reflect current styles and technological developments. Perhaps that was Stimson's message. Westerners wanted the world to see that they were passing from an impressive but uncontrolled adolescence to a mature, progressive, and civilized adulthood.

That statement has never been an easy one for westerners to make. On one hand, to attract new growth and development, the West has had to advertise freedom and space, opportunities for economic success and a second chance. Yet freedom, space, and unlimited opportunity diminish proportionately with increased development. It is first come, first served. Later arrivals find themselves in a conventional, regimented world run by large interests, like the Union Pacific Railroad. It was the "West," and it was progress to be proud of, but it was not wild and it was no longer the frontier. Americans have needed the myth of a Wild West, a place where the constraints of civilization could be abandoned or recast in a more comfortable mold. Stimson's

settled, developed, and bustling West must have been very unsettling to those who imagined a free and unbounded West. But western commercial clubs and boosters must have been very proud. Of course, there were problems in the maturing West of Stimson's time that were not addressed in these beautifully executed pictures of a proud western people. Two wests existed at the turn of the century. One was modern, energetic, and nearly urban in outlook and development. The other was isolated, rural, and filled with hardship, a world without access to culture, amenities, or dependable livelihoods. Although Stimson photographed the agricultural sector, his views depicted nicely developed, prosperous farms with crops in full flower. The West of struggle and failure existed at the time but does not appear here. Of course, even westerners who had failed did not necessarily want the image of the successful West of hope and opportunity, which matched their aspirations if not their circumstances, sullied by their disappointments. Stimson presented a picture of the West as westerners wished to be seen.

Another problem faced by the mature West was the issue of colonialism. With economic development came outside money and outside control. While the mature West provided jobs in industry, mining, and the railroads, loss of local autonomy and stability became a real issue. During flush times in the national economy, the West happily filled its role as a national economic asset. When downturns occurred, as they did with some regularity, the West slipped into regional pauperism. The realization of regimentation and outside control clashed with the official western ideology of individualism, freedom, and self-improvement. Stimson's lens did not capture this ambivalence, reflecting instead a West moving full face forward and full steam ahead. Where Butcher honored the homesteaders' achievements in the face of defeat, Stimson honored the boosters' aspirations in the face of reality.

CLARKE COLLEGE

PAULA M. NELSON

Christian Petersen Remembered, by Patricia Lounsbury Bliss. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986. xvi, 217 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

This biography of the sculptor associated with Iowa State University is the author's tribute to his memory and his works. From the early 1930s until his death in 1961, Christian Petersen produced monumental and relief sculptures for the Ames campus and carried out many portrait busts and reliefs. As Bliss notes, his position as sculptor-in-residence was one of the earliest artist-in-residence situations in America. She

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.